

Alan Ogden

# Revelations of Byzantium

The Monasteries and Painted Churches of Northern Moldavia



CENTER FOR  
*Romanian*  
STUDIES

Alan Ogden

# Revelations of Byzantium

The Monasteries and Painted Churches of Northern Moldavia



CENTER FOR  
*Romanian*  
STUDIES

# **Contents**

Moldavia and the Romanian Middle Ages

# **Moldavia and the Romanian Middle Ages**

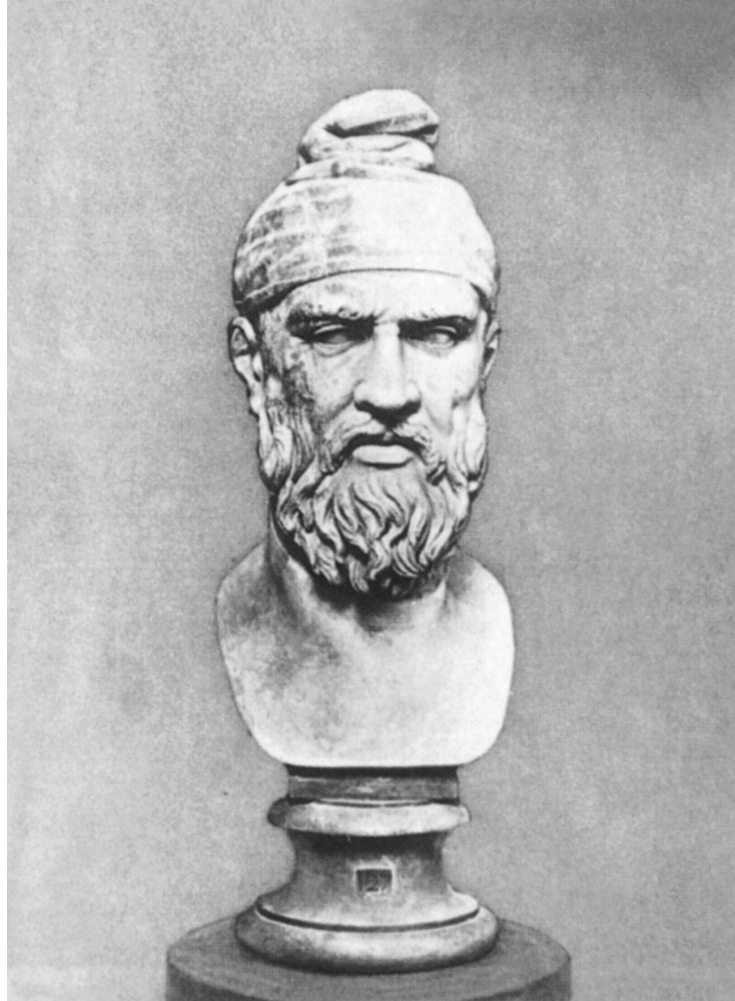
The monasteries and painted churches of Moldavia stand today as a testament to the rich cultural and spiritual heritage of the Romanian people. As the Romanians living in the historical provinces of Wallachia, Moldavia, and Transylvania, which today form modern Romania, struggled to maintain their autonomy against Ottoman expansion, their relative freedom allowed them to express themselves both artistically and culturally. Among their most remarkable creations are the monasteries and painted churches of Moldavia, in northeastern Romania, the subjects of this book. These monuments, unique in the world, reflect a cultural legacy inherited from Byzantium and the Roman Empire. This short essay is intended to provide the reader with a general history of this land during the period when these remarkable monuments were built.

## **The Formation of the Romanian People**

The Romanian lands have been inhabited since ancient times. During antiquity, an Indo-European population, the Geto-Dacians, a Thracian tribe, inhabited the present-day territory of Romania, which was then known as Dacia. In

addition, several Greek colonies were established along the Black Sea Coast. The first to mention the Geto-Dacians was the Greek historian Herodotus who referred to them as "the most manly and law abiding of the Thracian tribes." During the first century B.C. a powerful Geto-Dacian kingdom was founded by Burebista (70-44 B.C.), encompassing most of present-day Romania. This kingdom became a powerful threat to the expanding Roman Empire. Just before his assassination, Julius Caesar was preparing an expedition against the Geto-Dacians, but the death of Burebista that same year ended the danger as the kingdom became fragmented. Rome extended its influence south of the Danube, only to be challenged by the Geto-Dacian King Decebal (A.D. 87-106), who reestablished a powerful kingdom north of the Danube. This led the Roman Emperor Trajan to lead expeditions in A.D. 105-106 that resulted in the conquest of Dacia and its transformation into a Roman province.





King Decebal



Emperor Trajan

Over the next 165 years, Roman colonization led to the adoption of Latin as the language of communication and the adoption of many Roman customs. This process led to the formation of a Dacian-Roman people by the time Roman administration was withdrawn from the province in A.D. 271. Bound together by Christianity which began to penetrate into the region already in the second century, this population would evolve over the next several centuries to form the Romanian people. This people resisted the waves of barbarian invaders that swarmed into Europe after the

fall of the Roman Empire and preserved its unique identity, at times assimilating the less numerous invading peoples.

## **The Early History of the Romanian Lands**

As the barbarian invasions of the early Middle Ages began to subside, by the tenth century historical sources mention the appearance of several small Romanian state formations on the territory of present-day Romania. The great Mongol invasion of Europe in 1241 hindered the process of unification among these smaller states, but by the end of the thirteenth century this process led to the creation of the first independent Romanian principality — Wallachia. By the middle of the next century, a second independent Romanian principality, Moldavia, was established along the eastern slopes of the Carpathians, its territory bordered by the Carpathian Mountains, the Dniester River, and the Black Sea. From its foundation, Moldavia, together with its sister principality of Wallachia, played an important role in European history protecting the trade routes that crossed their territory linking Central Europe and the Black Sea.

The third Romanian land, Transylvania, fell under the control of the Hungarian kingdom beginning in the eleventh century, but maintained its individual identity as a separate principality. The Romanians, who formed the vast majority of the population in that region, were denied political rights and ruled over by an alliance of Hungarian noblemen, Szecklers, and Saxon colonists. Although the Romanians lived in three separate principalities during the Middle



Ages, economic, political, and cultural ties between them were never interrupted.

## **The Establishment of the Principality of Moldavia**

Native chronicles and historical tradition mention Dragoș Vodă, a Romanian nobleman from Maramureș, went hunting for an aurochs, together with a group of his faithful subjects, and arrived in Moldavia, becoming the founder of this principality. The head of the aurochs would henceforth be the symbol of the new country. Despite the inaccuracy of the chronicles, it is clear that around the middle of the fourteenth century (most likely around 1350) Dragoș, a Romanian dignitary from Transylvania, ruled over part of Moldavia (probably the regions near the mountains neighboring Maramureș and Transylvania) as a vassal of the king of Hungary.

After completing its conquest of Transylvania, the Hungarian Crown strove to eliminate the Romanian voievodat in Maramureș as part of its efforts to centralize the administration of the kingdom and impose Western feudal structures in the territories under its control. Several Romanian rulers in Maramureș, such as Dragoș Vodă, collaborated with the Crown, serving it faithfully to preserve their wealth and privileges. Others, led by a voievod from Maramureș called Bogdan, the ruler of a duchy with its capital at Cuhea, refused to compromise with the kingdom and organized a revolt.

Bogdan of Cuhea, a voievod from Maramureș, had been in conflict with the king of Hungary since 1342-1343.

Hungarian sources characterized him as a “notoriously unfaithful subject” of the king and, around 1359, he moved east of the Carpathians to organize his resistance. Unable to preserve their autonomy in Maramureș, approximately 200 nobles from the region followed Bogdan across the mountains to Moldavia where they joined with local boyars in a revolt against Hungarian rule. Bogdan drove away the successors of Dragoș and established the independence of Moldavia. A short time later, during the winter of 1364-1365, the Moldavians defeated an attack by a Hungarian army sent by King Louis I of Anjou, thus securing the independence of the new principality.

In subsequent years, during the reign of the voievods Lațcu (c. 1365-c. 1375), Peter I Mușat (c. 1375-c. 1391), and Roman I (c. 1391-1394), the territorial unification of Moldavia, within its historical borders, the Carpathians, the Dniester, and the Black Sea, was completed. The first voievod to attest to this fact in his princely title was Roman I who, in 1392, proudly referred to himself as “Moldavian voievod and heir of all Wallachia [Moldavia] from the mountains to the sea shore.”

Although the independence of Moldavia had been secured, its two Catholic neighbors, the kingdoms of Hungary and Poland, did not renounce their claims of suzerainty over the principality. Hungary invoked its apostolic mission to convert pagans and schismatics as a motive for extending its influence over Moldavia, but the Romanians resisted this pressure and expressed their dissatisfaction to the Holy See. In 1374, Pope Gregory XI knew that “those parts of the Romanian people” living

“along the borders of the Hungarian kingdom toward the Tatars,” had not accepted Catholicism because they “are discontent with the religious services of the Hungarian priests” and were requesting a hierarch “who knew the language of their nation.”

The traditional foreign policy of Moldavia during the Middle Ages was to attempt to counterbalance Polish and Hungarian influence by playing one off against the other. They would often shift alliances between the two Catholic kingdoms in an effort to maintain the autonomy of the country. Toward the end of the fourteenth century, after the creation of the Polish-Hungarian dynastic union, a metropolitanate, subordinate to Byzantium, was established in Moldavia. Thus, as would also happen south of the Carpathians, in Wallachia, recognition of princely authority in Moldavia — and implicitly the independence of the country — came from the Eastern world, toward which the Romanians would gravitate throughout the Middle Ages as a consequence of their Orthodox faith. This would be reflected in their art and culture and can still be seen today in the monasteries and painted churches that are presented in this book.

## **Alexander the Good**

The son of Prince Roman I Muşat (c. 1391-1394), Alexander the Good (1400-1432) came to the throne of Moldavia with the help of Mircea the Old (1385-1419), the ruler of Wallachia, in 1400. Like his Wallachian counterpart in the south, he developed and strengthened the political

institutions of Moldavia during his long and illustrious reign.



Prince Alexander the Good

Alexander promoted the organization of the Church. The metropolitanate of Moldavia at Suceava, which had been established during the reign of Peter I Muşat, was officially recognized by the patriarch in 1401, after an emissary from Constantinople, Gregory Țamblac, made a favorable report about the situation in Moldavia to the spiritual leader of the Orthodox Church. Țamblac remained in Moldavia for a time, being named *mare dascăl* (learned teacher) of the Church in Moldavia and lecturing in Suceava on the organization of the Church and Christian morality. He also wrote The Life and Deeds of St. John the New, whose remains were brought to Suceava by Alexander the Good in 1402. Later, Țamblac became metropolitan of Kiev. He participated, as the representative of both Kiev and Moldavia, at the Council of Constance (1415-1418), which condemned John Hus and discussed the possible unification of the Orthodox and Catholic Churches.

Throughout his reign, Alexander the Good promoted commerce, and succeeded in maintaining friendly relations with neighboring states, especially Poland, aiding the Poles in their wars against the Teutonic Knights in 1410, 1411, 1414, and 1422. To strengthen his ties with Poland, he granted special privileges to the merchants of Lemberg, who had a monopoly granted by the Polish Crown for trade with the Orient. After the death of his first wife, Ana, Alexander married Ringala, the sister of the duke of Lithuania and cousin of King Vladislav Jagiello of Poland. His ties with Poland strengthened the influence of the Catholic Church in Moldavia and a new bishopric was created at Baia, in addition to the one that had been established at Siret during the reign of Lațcu (c. 1365-c. 1375). He also established an Armenian bishopric in Suceava, and generally supported the activities of the Armenian merchants who played an important role in economic life in Moldavia. In addition, he allowed Hussite refugees from Bohemia to settle in the principality.





### Prince Stephen the Great

In 1420, Alexander succeeded in repulsing the first Ottoman attack on Moldavia. This would mark the beginning of a long period in which the Ottomans would be among the principal threats to the autonomy of the young principality. Following the death of Mircea the Old, he used the occasion of the internal power struggles in Wallachia to secure the southern border of his principality and to improve its economic situation by seizing the strategic fortress of Chilia along the Danube in 1421, which was also an important customs point through which a great deal of Moldavian trade passed.

As happened in Wallachia following the death of Mircea the Old, the death of Alexander the Good in January 1432 was followed by a long period of political instability in Moldavia as his sons, Iliáš and Stephen, struggled for the throne. In both Moldavia and Wallachia, the hereditary-elective principle, borrowed from Slavic customary law, governed ascension to the throne. As a result, there was no established principle of primogeniture in the Romanian principalities. Unlike Western Europe, all of the sons of the prince, both legitimate and illegitimate, had an equal claim to the throne, so long as they could gain the support of the leading nobles, called boyars. This allowed for frequent foreign interference in the struggles for the thrones in the medieval Romanian principalities. From the death of Alexander the Good until the ascension of Stephen the Great to the throne, a period of 25 years, the throne changed hands no less than sixteen times. These internal

conflicts weakened the country. As a result, in 1456, during the reign of Peter Aron (1455-1457), Moldavia accepted Ottoman suzerainty, agreeing to pay tribute to the sultan. Although the tribute was merely a symbolic price for peace and the principality maintained complete autonomy, it marked the beginning of Ottoman influence in Moldavia which would steadily increase throughout the next century.

## **Stephen the Great: The Apogee of Moldavia**

The greatest Romanian prince of the Middle Ages was Stephen the Great, the son of Prince Bogdan II and the grandson of Alexander the Good. During his father's reign from 1449-1451, Stephen gained some military experience, participating in a successful battle against the Poles at Crasna in 1450. In this battle, Stephen fought alongside his cousin, Vlad III Dracula, the historical Dracula, who at that time was in refuge at the Moldavian court. The relations between the two cousins would mark the history of the Romanian principalities until the death of the latter in 1476. After his father was assassinated by his uncle, Peter Aron, in 1451, Stephen lived in exile in Transylvania and Wallachia until, in the spring of 1457, he invaded Moldavia, with military assistance provided by his cousin Vlad III Dracula, who had become prince of Wallachia the previous year, and seized the throne. His ascension to the throne ended the bitter period of civil strife that had plagued Moldavia since the death of his grandfather in 1432.

Becoming ruler of a country weakened by internal struggles, Stephen continued the foreign policy of his

predecessor, as an ally of both Poland and the Ottoman Empire, during the early years of his reign. As Matthias Corvinus, the king of Hungary, supported efforts by Peter Aron to regain the throne, Stephen came into conflict with Hungary and Wallachia, which had recently become an ally of the Hungarian king against the Ottomans. As a result, Stephen joined the Ottomans in their attack on Vlad III Dracula and Wallachia in 1462. At the failed siege of Chilia, Stephen was wounded in the thigh. Less than three years later, in January 1465, he succeeded in capturing the fortress.

As a result of the ongoing conflict, the Hungarians invaded Moldavia through the Oituz Pass in 1467 and occupied, pillaged, and burned many settlements along their way, including Trotuș, Bacău, Roman, and Baia (a former capital of the principality, today a village in the county of Suceava), the latter being occupied on 14 December 1467. At Baia, Stephen (with approximately 12,000 soldiers) confronted a numerically superior force (of approximately 40,000 men) led by Matthias Corvinus, the king of Hungary. At dawn, Stephen set fire to the city and attacked the invaders. After a violent battle, the Hungarians were defeated; the king of Hungary was himself wounded in the fighting and had to abandon his arms and numerous dead soldiers on the field of battle. The campaign of 1467, which ended in total failure for the Hungarians, marked the last military attempt of the Hungarian Crown to reimpose its suzerainty over Moldavia.

Having established his independence from Hungary, Stephen now came into conflict with another potentially

dangerous neighbor, the Ottoman Turks. In the 1470s, Stephen embarked on an anti-Ottoman policy, refusing to pay tribute or present himself before Sultan Mehmed II, the conqueror of Constantinople. As a result, the sultan ordered the beylerbey of Rumelia, Suleiman Pasha, to assemble an army to attack Moldavia. An Ottoman army of approximately 100,000 men invaded the country at the beginning of 1475. They were opposed by Stephen, with an army of less than 40,000 soldiers. The Moldavian prince used guerilla warfare tactics, retreating before the enemy army as it advanced into Moldavia. A decisive confrontation took place at Podul Înalt, near Vaslui, on 10 January 1475, resulting in an overwhelming defeat of the Ottoman forces. News of the remarkable victory of the Moldavian prince over the Ottomans caused a great sensation in the capitals of Europe. With pride and dignity, the Moldavian prince announced his victory to all of Christian Europe: "We have defeated them and brought them under foot and put them to the sword for which God must be praised." The prince warned the kings of Europe that the Ottomans would return and try to conquer Moldavia, "the Gate of Christianity," and that "if this gate, our country, shall be lost, God forbid, then the whole Christianity shall be in great danger." Pope Sixtus IV sent words of encouragement to the Moldavian prince, proclaiming him an "Athlete of Christ," but little material assistance was forthcoming from the courts of Europe. A statue of Stephen, commemorating this important victory can be seen today at the site of the battle, along the highway 8 kilometers south of Vaslui.

In the summer of 1475 Stephen entered into an alliance with Hungary, his former enemy, to form a united Christian front to oppose the Ottomans. In the summer of 1476 Sultan Mehmed II led an invasion of Moldavia. Despite suffering a defeat at the hands of the Ottoman sultan at the battle of Războieni (Valea Albă), Stephen held out against the invaders due in large part to the strong system of fortifications he had built and strengthened, among these the fortress of Neamț, which can be visited today at Târgu Neamț. Later that year, Stephen went on the offensive and, with Hungarian assistance, he succeeded in briefly reinstalling his cousin, Vlad III Dracula, on the throne of Wallachia. Vlad would be killed while fighting the Turks at the end of 1476.





Prince Vlad III Dracula





Churches and Monasteries Built or Restored by Stephen the Great

After the death of Mehmed the Conqueror in 1481, Moldavia, in cooperation with Hungary, again tried to free the Lower Danube region, but without success. Three years later, Bayezid II (1481-1512), the new sultan, conquered the last two Romanian fortresses in the Black Sea region, Chilia and Cetatea Albă. As a result, Moldavia lost important strategic points, as well as significant customs revenues. A peace treaty was finally concluded with the Ottomans in 1485. In his efforts to strengthen the position of Moldavia and protect it from increasing Ottoman interference, Stephen frequently came into conflict with the princes of

Wallachia as he sought to transform it into a buffer state. In 1481 Prince Basarab the Young wrote to the officials of Sibiu complaining that “since Prince Stephen has ruled in Moldavia he has not liked any ruler of Wallachia. He did not wish to live with Prince Radu, nor with Basarab the Old, nor with me. I do not know who can live with him.”

A conflict with the king of Poland, who attempted to exert his suzerainty over the country, marked the final phase of Stephen’s reign. In 1497 he repulsed a Polish invasion of Moldavia led by King John Albert. The Polish army was decisively defeated in the battle of Codrul Cosminului. This would be Stephen’s last great military victory. In 1499 a peace treaty reestablished relations between Poland and Moldavia on the basis of equality. With this victory, Stephen had assured Moldavia’s independence against each of its three powerful neighbors.

Stephen the Great died on 2 July 1504 after reigning for 47 years, two months, and three weeks, one of the longest reigns of any ruler in Romanian history. He is buried in the monastery at Putna, which he built. Although internal strife and Ottoman domination would mark the history of Moldavia following Stephen’s death, he left a permanent imprint on the history of his people and country.

## **Stephen’s Legacy**

Stephen’s remarkable success lay less in his military prowess than his political and diplomatic skill which rank him amongst the most astute politicians of fifteenth century Europe. As the ruler of a small state surrounded by three great powers, he managed, with great skill, to play one off

against the other to gain advantages for his principality. He improved the fortifications system in Moldavia to compensate for the increasing importance of firearms in warfare. His reign also marked the development of state institutions in the country.

Stephen's reign is also remarkable for the lasting cultural contributions he made. He is said to have built 44 churches and monasteries during his reign as prince, of which 32 have been identified. Many of these remain today as artistic treasures and are presented in this book, including the monasteries of Voroneț, Humor, Neamț, and Putna, where the Moldavian prince is buried.

Stephen the Great remained in the consciousness of the Romanian people, as a symbol of their proud heritage. In 1992 he was canonized by the Romanian Orthodox Church and he is known by Romanians as Stephen the Great and Holy. His name and deeds have inspired numerous writings. The Romanian national poet Mihai Eminescu devoted one of his most famous poems, "Doina," to the memory of the Moldavian prince, which, in the following lines, reflects the reverence Romanians feel for their famous medieval hero:

*Rise, O' Stephen, mighty Prince,  
From Sacred Putna come hence,  
Let the holy Prelacy  
Guard alone the monastery,  
Let the saints and their deeds  
In the trust of pious priests,  
Let them ring the bell with might  
All the day and all the night,  
And may mercy grant thee Lord  
Redeem thy people from the horde...*





## **Romanian Culture in Fifteenth Century Moldavia**

Medieval Romanian culture, and society in general, maintained contact with the rest of Europe, being influenced by the great cultural trends of the time in the Eastern Slavic-Byzantine world, as well as those in Western Europe. In the Romanian principalities, and throughout

Europe, the languages of written culture were different from the vernacular languages. The Romanians, including those from Transylvania, traditionally used Slavonic writing, but because of their continuous ties with Western Europe, Latin and Greek were also used as languages of culture.

Slavonic writing developed as early as the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, in the form of inscriptions on stone, ceramics, and walls, or in the form of religious texts copied on parchment. Thus, we find collections of Byzantine literature with religious, juridical, and philosophical undertones. Important centers of Slavonic writing were the monasteries and churches at Bistrița, Putna, and Neamț in Moldavia, as well as Tismana, Vodița, and Cozia in Wallachia, and at Peri, Prislop, Feleac, and Șcheii Brașovului in Transylvania, as well as the princely courts where official deeds and documents, as well as diplomatic correspondence were written, and where literate priests and merchants could be found.

The most important writings of the time were done at the princely courts. Thus, *The Chronicle from the Origins of the Moldavian Land* was written at the order of Stephen the Great during the latter half of the fifteenth century as a testimony to the consolidation of a historical consciousness and in appreciation of the values of the past. For political and diplomatic reasons, the chronicle was also written in German and Polish, to promote knowledge about Moldavia and its prince during an epoch when the country played a major role in international affairs.

## **Moldavia under Ottoman Suzerainty**



Following the death of Stephen the Great, Moldavia again fell into a period of internal strife. At the beginning of the sixteenth century the Ottoman Empire was at its height and the Romanian principalities were, at times, in danger of falling under direct Turkish rule. The Romanian boyars, aware of the fate of the Bulgarian, Serbian, and Albanian nobility whose estates had been confiscated, had to choose between a policy of resistance and one of conciliation.

While the military victories of the Romanian principalities proved that it would be difficult to subdue them by force of arms, the boyars were open to negotiating with the Turks and willing to accept political formulas that would guarantee their economic, social, and political status. The demographic and economic consequences of the wars against the Ottomans endangered the Romanian boyar households and disorganized the economic system of the country. This led the nobility and many of the princes to seek a *modus vivendi* with the Porte reflected in the policy of oscillation between resistance and conciliation. This policy of resistance is illustrated by a series of great wars fought during the anti-Ottoman crusades, in which the Romanian principalities played an essential role. The policy of conciliation was reflected in a series of treaties with the Ottoman Empire. Many princes, such as Mircea the Old, Vlad Dracul, and Stephen the Great, wisely strove to maintain a careful balance between these two alternatives as they sought to preserve the independence of their principalities.

The Italian humanist, Filippo Buonaccorsi Callimachus, writing to the pope with admiration for the military efforts

of the Romanians against the Ottomans, asserted that “they did not surrender under military pressure, but did so conditionally,” and that they “negotiated treaties, not as losers, but as victors.” These bilateral treaties stipulated the unaltered maintenance of native institutions in the Romanian principalities, the absolute authority of the princes in their countries, partial freedom of action in foreign affairs, limitations on the presence of Turks in the Romanian lands, respect for the Orthodox Christian faith, and the interdiction of any Islamic religious manifestations in the principalities; in exchange, they paid tribute to the sultan and provided military assistance to the empire when needed.

In general, with few exceptions, these provisions were respected during the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, but Ottoman pressure gradually impeded upon the autonomy of the principalities. This was especially true during the sixteenth century. Up to the middle of this century Ottoman suzerainty over the Romanian principalities was more theoretical than real, because the tribute, still largely symbolic, was considered to be a ransom for peace. The freedom of action of Moldavia and Wallachia on an international level had been, up to that time, at least partial.

From the mid-sixteenth century, following the Turkish conquest of Hungary, Ottoman suzerainty over the Romanian principalities became increasingly burdensome. In politics, Ottoman interference was seen in the confirmation of the princes by the sultan; in practice, the throne had to be purchased at the Porte. Independent

action in foreign affairs was severely restricted and several Romanian territories were annexed by the empire (after Turnu, Giurgiu, Dobrogea, Chilia, and Cetatea Albă, followed Tighina, Brăila, and the Banat). Princes were frequently changed so that none became too powerful; Ottoman domination also favored the entry of many foreign peoples into the Romanian lands, especially Greeks. Nevertheless, the Danube always remained a political and military border that separated Christianity from the lands under direct Ottoman occupation.

## **Peter Rareș and His Successors**

The most successful of Stephen the Great's successors was his illegitimate son, Peter Rareș. The reign of Peter Rareș (1527-1538; 1541-1546) in Moldavia was complicated as it coincided with the collapse of the medieval kingdom of Hungary and the peak of Ottoman Power. After having spent many years in exile at the Polish court, he came to the throne with the support of the Moldavian boyars in 1527. As the war between Ferdinand of Hapsburg and the Ottoman candidate, John Zapolya, over the throne of Hungary was going on, Peter pursued a shrewd policy, playing the two sides off against one another, while trying to gain possession of Transylvania for himself. In 1529 he took possession of estates that had originally been granted to his father, Stephen the Great, as well as a large portion of the Szeckler districts and the silver mines of Rodna. The following year he besieged Bistrița and forced its Saxon inhabitants into submission.

In 1531 Peter began a war against the kingdom of Poland to recover the district of Pocuția that had been lost during the reign of Bogdan III (1504-1517), but he was defeated at the battle of Obertyn. Over the next several years he continued his policy of playing the Hapsburgs and the Ottomans off against one another. Eventually, he lost the trust of both sides and in the summer of 1538 the sultan, after learning of his secret correspondence with Ferdinand of Hapsburg, decided to drive him from the throne. The Ottomans also took control of Tighina and Bugeac, the former becoming a raia at this time.



Peter Rareș — Votive Painting from the Humor Monastery

After spending more than a year imprisoned in Transylvania, Peter Rareș escaped and set out to regain the

confidence of the Porte. He succeeded in doing so and, with Ottoman assistance, he recovered his throne in 1541. Upon returning to Moldavia, he immediately executed the boyars who had betrayed him in 1538. During his second reign he supported the Ottomans, but made tentative attempts to gain Western support to free Moldavia from Ottoman domination, negotiating an alliance with the elector of Brandenburg. Nevertheless, his efforts to secure the independence of Moldavia through skillful diplomacy could not stop the increase of Ottoman domination in the Romanian lands.

In part to compensate for his limited political freedom, Peter encouraged the arts. After that of Stephen the Great, his reign marked the highest point of cultural development in Moldavia during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Peter Rareș constructed or rebuilt and painted numerous churches and monasteries. Among his most significant cultural achievements were the construction of the monasteries of Probota, where he is buried, Râșca, and Moldovița, renowned for its exterior mural paintings. Peter Rareș's throne can still be seen in the museum of this monastery.

Despite the efforts of Peter Rareș and other princes, Ottoman control over the Romanian principalities steadily increased throughout the sixteenth century, with various pretenders vying to gain the approval of the Ottoman Porte to ascend to the throne. The reigns of unscrupulous princes such as Peter Cercel and adventurers like Despot Vodă (Jacob Heraclide) reflect the degradation of the political situation in the Romanian principalities during the latter

half of the sixteenth century. Despite this, many of them followed the example of Peter Rareș and contributed to the cultural and artistic development in Moldavia.

## **The Anti-Ottoman Struggle of John the Brave**

The anti-Ottoman struggle in Moldavia was revived for a brief time by John the Brave (1572-1574). A man of considerable wealth, John purchased the Moldavian throne at the Porte for 200,000 galbens. Upon assuming the throne he worked to strengthen the authority of the prince, taking harsh measures against the boyars and the church hierarchy, for which he earned the nickname "the Terrible." He also tried to throw off Ottoman domination, earning him the respect of his soldiers and the common people who admired his courage and daring.

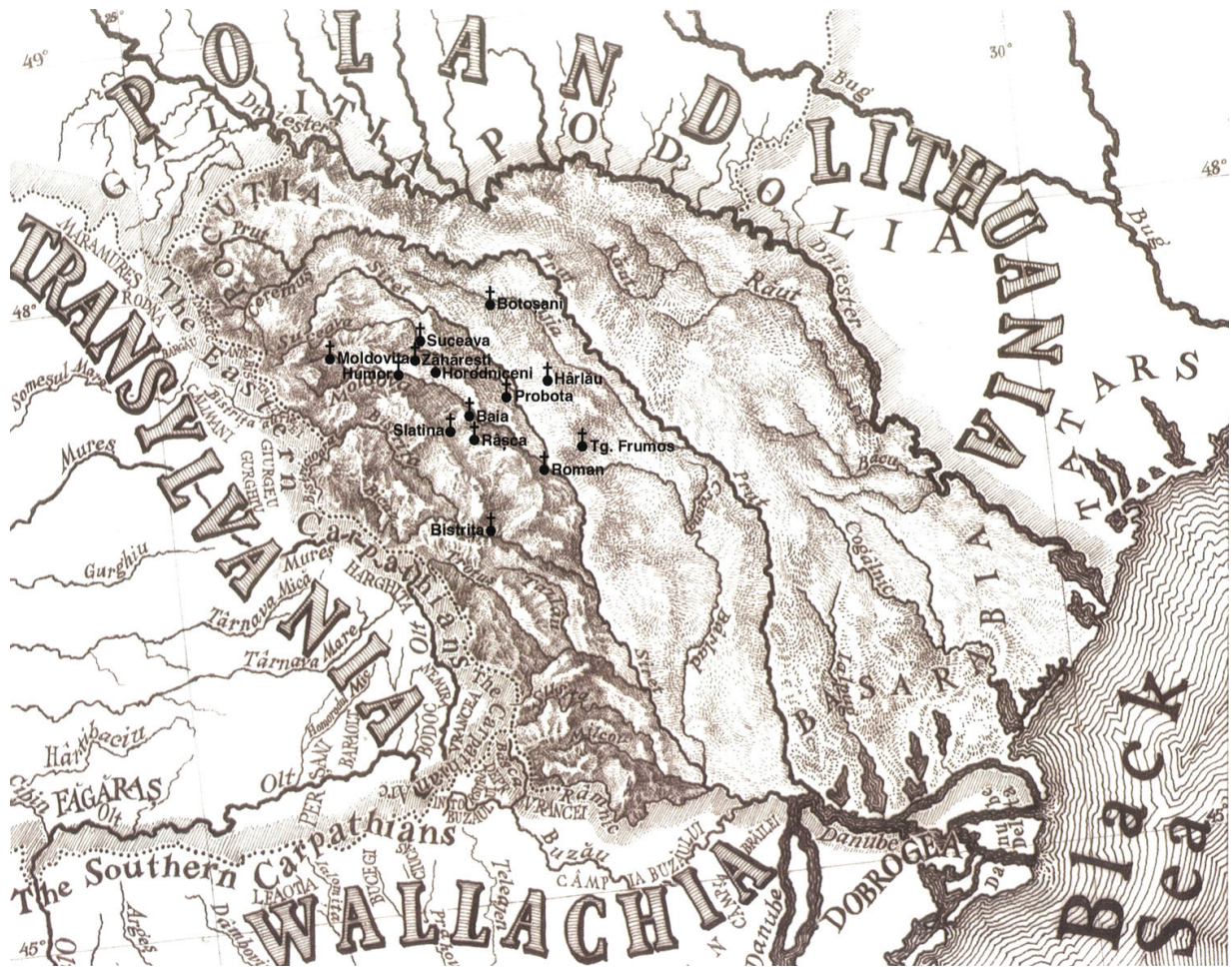




Prince John the Brave

At the beginning of 1574 he refused to pay tribute to the sultan after the Porte doubled the amount from 40,000 to 80,000 galbens. As a result, an Ottoman-Wallachian army invaded Moldavia in April 1574. John the Brave defeated the invaders in a surprise attack, near Jiliște. After this victory, the Moldavian prince, aided by Cossack troops, attacked and burned Ottoman strongholds at Brăila, Tighina, and Cetatea Albă, but he failed to capture these

strategic fortresses. This led Sultan Selim II (1566-1574) to send a large army, supported by Wallachian troops and Tatars from the Crimea, against the prince of Moldavia. After an indecisive initial confrontation on 10 June, the prince, lacking cavalry, which had betrayed him and crossed over to the enemy, and unable to use his artillery forces because of torrential rains, was forced to retreat. He established a fortified camp at Cahul, where he resisted enemy attacks for three days (11-13 June). He surrendered conditionally to enemy forces that outnumbered his own by five to one, but the terms of his surrender were not respected and John the Brave was drawn and quartered by the Turks, while his followers were massacred. His failed attempt to throw off the Ottoman yoke, while heroic, could not halt the increasing control exercised by the Porte over the Romanian principalities.



Churches and Monasteries Built or Restored by Peter Rareș

## Culture in the Sixteenth Century

The influence of the Italian and German Renaissance, often through Hungarian and Polish channels, and the ideas of rebirth coming from the Byzantine and Orthodox worlds were felt in the Romanian lands already toward the end of the fifteenth century. A renewed appreciation for the values of antiquity again influenced people and their artistic creations.

Among the Romanians, the consciousness of their Latinity was strengthened, along with their pride in being descendants of the Romans. Foreign travellers learned from

the Romanians themselves about their illustrious ancestors and recorded this information in their writings that circulated throughout Europe. Thus, in 1532-1534, while travelling in Transylvania and Wallachia, the Italian Francesco della Valle heard "the history of the settlement of the inhabitants of this country" from some simple monks at the monastery of Dealu, near Târgoviște: "the Emperor Trajan, after conquering this country, divided it among his soldiers and made it into a Roman colony, so that these Romanians are descendants, as it is said, of these ancient colonists, and they preserve the name Romans."

In 1562, in his proclamation to the country, the Greek adventurer Despot Vodă (1561-1563), who had become prince of Moldavia, encouraged the Moldavians to join in the anti-Ottoman struggle by reminding them of their Roman ancestry. The prince promised "to fight day and night with the cursed infidel Turks," alongside the Moldavians, "a brave people of a warrior race, descendants of the illustrious Romans, who made the world tremor. And in this way we will make it known to the whole world that we are true Romans and their descendants, and our name will never die and we will make proud the memories of our parents." Through his choice of rhetoric, the prince clearly knew that the Romanians were aware of their Latinity.

The same prince, Jacob Heraclide, called Despot Vodă, founded a Latin school at Cotnari, bringing in foreign professors, and he established an academy and a library. After the invention of the printing press, the Romanian lands were among the first countries in East Central Europe to employ this new means of spreading culture. The

first printed books appeared at Târgoviște, Brașov, and Alba Iulia. Thus, thanks to the efforts of the monk Macarie, in 1508, 1510, and 1512 the principal books of the Orthodox religion were printed in Slavonic, the official language of the Church, in Wallachia and sent throughout all three Romanian lands, as well as in the Balkan lands under Ottoman occupation. A short time later, a book of political advice, a guide to governing equivalent to Machiavelli's *The Prince*, was also published, entitled *Teachings of Neagoe Basarab to His Son Teodosie*. In Moldavia, Peter Rareș, Alexander Lăpușneanu, and Peter the Lamé patronized chroniclers at their courts, who wrote in Slavonic and praised the virtues of the princes, suggesting analogies with antiquity, and imitating the rhetorical style of ancient writers.

Romanian culture, open to both the Eastern and Western worlds, played a fundamental role in the consolidation of the unity of the Romanians and the realization of their Latin origins and their continuity in their lands. During this same period, when a sense of cultural unity was becoming more evident, the recognition of a common heritage and language was called upon to serve as a framework for the first great attempt at the political unification of the Romanian lands.

## **Michael the Brave**

The man who would realize this brief unification was Michael the Brave. Born in 1558, Michael rose to become a wealthy and influential boyar, holding several positions as a high official at court in Wallachia, rising to the rank of ban



of Craiova in 1590. He led the boyar opposition to Prince Alexander the Bad (1592-1593) and, after making the necessary bribes and gifts, won the approval of the Ottoman Porte and attained the throne of Wallachia in 1593 with the support of the boyars and the approval of the Ottoman court.



Prince Michael the Brave

After obtaining the throne, he embarked upon a program to strengthen the central authority of the state, replacing the members of the princely council with officials personally loyal to him. He also strengthened the position of the boyars, binding the peasants to the land. He adopted an anti-Ottoman policy, forming a series of political and military alliances in this scope. He began his revolt against Ottoman authority by ordering the massacre of Turks in Wallachia in November, 1594, and attacking Ottoman positions along the Danube during the winter of 1594-1595. As a result, the sultan ordered Sinan Pasha to invade Wallachia in the summer of 1595, but Michael the Brave defeated the Ottoman forces at the battles of Călugăreni (13/23 August 1595) and Giurgiu (28-30 October 1595). After a series of victories by the Wallachian prince, he concluded a peace treaty with the Ottomans in 1598. In exchange for paying a substantially reduced tribute, the Porte confirmed Michael on the throne and agreed not to interfere in the internal affairs of Wallachia. In the same year, he concluded an alliance with the Hapsburg Emperor Rudolph II.

Michael continued to pursue a policy designed to unite the Romanian principalities in the anti-Ottoman struggle. In 1599 he invaded Transylvania against Prince Andrei Bathory who pursued a pro-Ottoman policy. After defeating Bathory's army at the battle of Șelimbăr on 28 October 1599, Michael the Brave entered Alba Iulia on 1 November 1599 where he was elected prince of Transylvania. In the spring of 1600 he invaded Moldavia, overthrowing pro-Ottoman and pro-Polish prince, Ieremia Movilă, thus

bringing about the political union of the three Romanian principalities.

Michael's growing power led the Magyar nobles, with Hapsburg support, to rise up against him. Michael was defeated by the Transylvanian nobles, led by the Hapsburg General George Basta, at Mirăslău on 18 September 1600. At the same time the Poles invaded Moldavia and Wallachia, defeating Michael's forces. In this moment of crisis, Michael left for Prague to appeal to Emperor Rudolph II for support. The emperor agreed to support a counterattack on the Magyar nobility that had turned on the Hapsburgs. Michael entered Transylvania at the head of an imperial army and joined forces with George Basta. Together they defeated the Transylvanian nobles, led by Sigismund Bathory, at the battle of Gurăslău in August, 1601. Fearing that Michael would regain his former power, Basta ordered the assassination of Michael at Câmpia Turzii on 19 August 1601.

Michael did not intend to bring about Romanian unity. Such an idea was totally alien to the sixteenth century. Instead, his achievement was the result of personal ambition, the need to secure his position on the throne, and his desire to achieve independence, combined with his resentment of Ottoman domination and the burden of the heavy tribute. He displayed exceptional diplomatic and military skill as he reacted against the intrigues of neighboring powers and brought about the momentary union of Wallachia, Transylvania, and Moldavia under his rule. The bases to consolidate his achievement, however, did not yet exist. Even so, although it was short-lived, the

brief union of the Romanian principalities under Michael the Brave survived as an ideal for later generations, especially during the nineteenth century when intellectuals worked for the unification of the Romanian lands into a national state.

## **Ottoman Domination at Its Height**

Following the age of Michael the Brave, the influence of the Ottoman Empire in the Romanian principalities gradually increased. During the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries the annual tribute paid to the Porte by Moldavia fluctuated. From the sharp decline at the beginning of the century, the tribute increased to 41,000 galbens in 1654; the Ottoman and Polish campaigns in Moldavia at the end of the century caused so much devastation that the Porte agreed to reduce the tribute to 26,000 galbens.

As a result of increasing Ottoman domination, the freedom of action of the Moldavian princes, as well as their Wallachian counterparts, declined significantly, especially when weak rulers occupied the thrones in Iași and Bucharest. While in their capitals the princes continued to consider themselves to be autocratic rulers, displaying a grandeur resembling Byzantine emperors, in Constantinople the Romanian princes were increasingly considered as part of the administrative system of the empire, their position being equivalent to that of a pasha with two *tuiu*, as compared with the grand vizier who had three *tuiu*.

In Moldavia, where a strong pro-Polish movement existed among the boyars, best illustrated by the reign of Ieremia Movilă (1595-1600; 1600-1606) who became a vassal of the Polish king and married his daughters to Polish noblemen, the Porte deemed it necessary to adopt a strategy of physically exterminating its opponents to impose its domination in the principality. The cruelty of the new prince in Iași, Stephen Tomșa, and his readiness to order executions made the boyars feel that they “were always standing on the edge of the grave.” His reign of terror caused a rebellion among the nobility, again opening the door to Polish interference in Moldavia, something which the Porte sought to end once and for all. The extermination of the rebels by Stephen Tomșa did not save his throne. In 1616 the Porte replaced him with Radu Mihnea, the son of a Romanian prince who had converted to Islam and who had previously promoted reconciliation in Wallachia.

A little more than thirty years after Michael the Brave briefly threw off the Turkish yoke and succeeded in uniting the three Romanian principalities under his rule a new leader arose, this time in Moldavia, whose ambition led him to picture himself as a successor of the Byzantine emperors with his capital in Iași — Vasile Lupu.

## **Vasile Lupu: A Moldavian Prince in the Mold of the Byzantine Emperors**

Romanian history has had its share of flamboyant personalities, but few could measure up to Vasile Lupu, the prince of Moldavia from 1634 to 1653. One of the most famous princes of early modern Romanian history, he



became noted for his grandiose style and distinguished himself during his long reign (the longest during the troubled seventeenth century in Moldavia), leaving behind an impressive list of cultural achievements that contributed greatly to Romania's rich cultural patrimony.

Of Albanian origin, with a Greek education, before he became prince Vasile Lupu (whose name translates into English as Basil the Wolf) was an important official at the Moldavian court. He attained the throne in 1634 as the result of a revolt of native boyars against their Greek counterparts. Only four decades earlier, the oppressive nature of Ottoman rule, especially the harsh fiscal policies, resulted in a brief moment of glory for the Romanian principalities when Prince Michael the Brave (1593-1601) threw off the Ottoman yoke and briefly united Wallachia, Transylvania, and Moldavia under his rule in 1600. It would be a legacy that Vasile Lupu would strive to restore.



## Prince Vasile Lupu

Ever since the fall of Constantinople in 1453, the sultans had relied upon the Greek aristocracy to help manage the affairs of the Empire. Precisely because of their close cooperation with the Ottomans, the Greeks played an increasingly important role in administering the wealth of the Romanian principalities during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries as these lands increasingly lost their autonomy. Naturally, the native aristocracy resented the influx of Greek aristocrats into the principalities and the increasing fiscal pressure from the Porte. Vasile Lupu took advantage of this resentment to gain support for his bid to the throne of Moldavia. Similar circumstances had brought Matei Basarab to the throne of Wallachia only two years earlier in 1632.

Vasile Lupu would soon disappoint those who helped to bring him to the throne. He was not interested in reducing taxation and bestowing advantages upon the boyars, but rather in transforming Moldavia into a strong, autocratic principality which could serve as the basis for the new empire he hoped to build. To do this he imposed ever higher taxes and embarked on grand projects, seeking to make Iași the focal point for the Orthodox world.

An ambitious prince, Vasile Lupu envisaged himself as a reincarnation of the Byzantine emperors. The Moldavian chronicler Miron Costin best described the personality of this prince, when he wrote that Vasile Lupu was “a man with a lofty nature, more like that of an emperor than a prince.” He was, however, wise enough to maintain peaceful relations with the Ottomans during the early part of his

reign, realizing that he was not strong enough to enter into conflict with his suzerain. He was also a shrewd politician who knew well the art of Byzantine politics, playing his enemies off against each other.

Vasile Lupu hoped to follow in the footsteps of Prince Michael the Brave who had succeeded, albeit briefly, in bringing the three Romanian principalities — Moldavia, Wallachia, and Transylvania — under his rule in 1600. To build his new Empire, he tried to convince the Ottomans to remove Matei Basarab, the prince of Wallachia, from the throne. Moldavia alone was too small for this ambitious prince and his dreams of Empire gave birth to a series of military conflicts with Matei Basarab. He undertook two unsuccessful campaigns against Wallachia in 1637 and 1639. First, he attempted to put his son John on the throne of Wallachia, and later he tried to rule over both principalities, going so far as to proclaim himself prince of both Moldavia and Wallachia in 1639. Having failed to oust his rival in Wallachia, the Moldavian prince turned elsewhere for support for his grandiose plans.

In 1645 Vasile Lupu changed direction and joined the anti-Ottoman front, allying with Poland in hopes of gaining an ally who could help him extend his rule over the other Romanian principalities. His policy again failed and, as a result, between 1646 and 1650 Moldavia was devastated by Tartar and Cossack raids. He eventually made peace with the Cossacks when, in 1652 the Cossack leader, Bogdan Hmelniŭki, made an offer of peace and alliance if Vasile Lupu's youngest daughter, Ruxandra, would marry his son Timuș.



Having cemented a new alliance, Vasile Lupu again turned his attention to his rival in Wallachia. Like Vasile Lupu, Matei Basarab had also come to the throne as the result of a revolt by native boyars against Greek aristocrats who, under the protection of the Ottoman Porte, had gained important positions in the economic, political, and ecclesiastical life of the principality during the preceding centuries. With Tartar and Cossack support, Vasile Lupu again unsuccessfully attempted to remove him from the throne in 1653. In retaliation, Matei Basarab, together with the prince of Transylvania, George Rákóczi II, whose throne Vasile Lupu also coveted, invaded Moldavia and overthrew the prince, placing his logofăt, Gheorghe Ștefan, on the throne.

Vasile Lupu took refuge in Poland and appealed to his son-in-law Timuș for assistance. The latter led a Cossack attack against Moldavia that defeated the rebels and briefly restored Vasile Lupu to the throne; they then attacked Wallachia, reaching Târgoviște before being decisively defeated at the battle of Finta on 17 November 1653. Supported by the native boyars, Gheorghe Ștefan regained the throne of Moldavia and forced Vasile Lupu to flee after Timuș met his death at the fortress of Suceava, which was besieged by Transylvanian, Wallachian, Moldavian, and Polish troops.

After losing the throne, Vasile Lupu took refuge in Istanbul, hoping to win Ottoman support to regain the throne of Moldavia, but was imprisoned for several years. Vasile Lupu would never see his dream of building a new Byzantium in the Romanian principalities realized. After the



sultan freed him from prison, he did, however, manage to help his son Stephen gain the throne of Moldavia in 1659. Vasile Lupu would, himself, die in exile in Constantinople in 1661.

## **The Cultural Legacy of Vasile Lupu**

Education, art, and culture flourished during the reign of Vasile Lupu. He established a college named the Academia Vasiliana and set up a printing press that published important religious books in the Romanian language. He also issued important legal codes. In terms of court extravagance, Vasile Lupu had a forerunner in Radu Mihnea, but he far surpassed him in his propensity to behave like a Byzantine emperor.

This was most apparent in his relations with the Church. He gave massive financial assistance to the Patriarchate in Constantinople, over which he exerted a true tutelage. He worked closely with the metropolitan of Kiev, Peter Movilă, the son of Simion Movilă, one of the great reformers of the Orthodox Church. He convoked a synod of all Orthodox believers in Iași in 1642, in which representatives of the patriarchate and of the Metropolitanate of Kiev took part, and which adopted a dogmatic text called "The Orthodox Confession." He also brought the remains of St. Paraschiva, an important Orthodox saint, to Iași (she would become the patron saint of the city and remains so today as her remains now rest in the Metropolitan Cathedral). All this helped to give the impression that the Moldavian prince was in fact a Byzantine emperor reigning in Iași.

The most impressive cultural achievement Vasile Lupu realized was the building of the Three Hierarchs Monastery (Trei Ierarhi) in Iași. It is one of the most exquisite monuments of medieval religious art in Moldavia. Built between 1635 and 1639, the church, although built in the style of Moldavian churches of the time, is distinguished by its exterior rows of sculptured stone, each with a unique design, making it unique in all the world. Originally, the stone was coated with gold. In addition, a clock tower, the first of its kind in Moldavia, stood at the entrance to the churchyard. Unfortunately, the clock tower no longer exists, but the church remains one of the most impressive religious monuments in all of Eastern Europe. A foreign traveler who visited the church in 1653 wrote that “nowhere is there a church that can match the beauty of its ornamentation.” Originally, it was a monastery and it housed a princely school and a printing press. It also served as the seat of the metropolitanate for many years. Today, while still functioning as a church, it is one of the most impressive museums in Iași, a city blessed by many cultural riches. The church is also the burial place of the famous Moldavian Prince Dimitrie Cantemir and of Alexandru Ioan Cuza, the first prince of modern Romania.

## **The End of An Era**

In many ways the seventeenth century marks the end of an era as the Romanian lands moved from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern Era. Vasile Lupu would be the last Romanian prince to make a serious attempt to restore the grandeur of Moldavia under Stephen the Great. At the end

of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth centuries important changes took place in the political situation of the Romanian countries. Following the expansion of Austria toward the southeast that began after the Turks failed at the siege of Vienna in 1683, Transylvania became a principality within the Hapsburg Empire. After Russia approached the boundaries of Moldavia during the reign of Peter the Great, and the Hapsburg Empire occupied Transylvania, the Ottoman Empire changed its system of governing the Romanian lands to prevent the emancipation of the two Danubian principalities, introducing the Phanariot regime in Moldavia and Wallachia at the beginning of the eighteenth century. During this period, the Ottomans appointed princes loyal to the empire from among the Greek aristocracy in Istanbul, most of whom lived in a district known as the Phanar. The governors of the principality of Transylvania were now named directly by the Court of Vienna. During the century of Phanariot rule (1711/1716-1821), despite the oppressive form of the Ottoman domination in terms of rigorous political control and economic exploitation, important fiscal, social, administrative, and judicial reforms were realized, including the abolition of serfdom.



Throughout this period the two countries managed to maintain their autonomy despite increasing interference in their internal affairs by the Ottoman Porte. This interference had tragic consequences and resulted in significant territorial losses, first in 1774 when Austria took the part of northern Moldavia known as Bucovina, and later in 1812, following the Treaty of Bucharest in 1812, ending the Russo-Turkish War, when the eastern part of Moldavia, known as Bessarabia, was annexed by Tsarist Russia. The Phanariot period came to an end with an uprising in 1821 led by Tudor Vladimirescu, which coincided with the Greek War for Independence, the result of which was the reinstallation of Romanian princes on the thrones of Wallachia and Moldavia.

Throughout this difficult period, a sense of ethnic and later national consciousness began to develop among Romanian intellectuals. Education in the Romanian language began and the bases for the development of modern Romanian literature were laid. Further developments and socioeconomic conflicts led to the outbreak of revolutions in all three Romanian lands in 1848-1849. The revolutions had as their principal objectives national liberty, improvement of the condition of the peasantry, the equality of rights of all citizens, and the elimination of foreign interference in the internal affairs of the Romanian lands. Although they were defeated, the Revolutions of 1848-1849 marked the beginning of a movement for unification among the Romanians of all three lands that would grow and develop during the following



decades. Following 1848 political, social, and cultural life in Wallachia and Moldavia were dominated by the idea of unification of the two principalities.

The realization of the union of the principalities was made possible by the defeat of Russia during the Crimean War (1853-1856). In the summer of 1857 assemblies in Iași and Bucharest, with delegates representing all social classes participating, unanimously voted in favor of the unification of the two principalities in a single state with the name Romania. Despite objections by the Great Powers, Romanians in Moldavia (on 5 January 1859) and Wallachia (on 24 January 1859) both elected Alexandru Ioan Cuza as their prince, bringing about through their own initiative, the de facto unification of the principalities. Here the history of the principality of Moldavia ends and the story of modern Romania begins.

*Kurt W. Treptow*

The monasteries and painted churches of Moldavia stand today as a testament to the rich cultural and spiritual heritage of the Romanian people. As the Romanians living in the historical provinces of Wallachia, Moldavia, and Transylvania, which today form modern Romania, struggled to maintain their autonomy against Ottoman expansion, their relative freedom allowed them to express themselves both artistically and culturally. Among their most remarkable creations are the monasteries and painted churches of Moldavia, in northeastern Romania, the subjects of this book. These monuments, unique in the world, reflect a cultural legacy inherited from Byzantium and the Roman Empire.

After the fall of Byzantium and the expansion of Ottoman rule throughout the Balkan Peninsula, the Romanian principalities became the most important depository of the Byzantine heritage. It was here that this tradition was preserved, having been passed on to the Romanians of the Middle Ages by their ancestors. From here this heritage continued to spread throughout Europe and influence European society and culture, creating the historical phenomenon that the great Romanian historian Nicolae Iorga would refer to as "Byzantium after Byzantium." The monasteries and painted churches of Northern Moldavia stand today as true revelations of Byzantium.

This book is written and photographed by Alan Ogden, the author of *Romania Revisited: On the Trail of English Travellers, 1602-1941* and *Fortresses of Faith: A Pictorial History of the Fortified Saxon Churches of Romania*, both published by the Center for Romanian Studies. The author provides a comprehensive introduction discussing the art and architecture of the monasteries and painted churches of Northern Moldavia. Each church is then presented separately in words and pictures to reveal its own unique history and artistic beauty. Also included is an introduction on the history of Moldavia and Romanian lands during the Middle Ages by Kurt W. Treptow, a noted specialist on Romanian history.



HISTRIA  
BOOKS

